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ABSTRACT

If the quality of education is to adapt to the rapidly changing needs of society and increased standards of accountability, administrators and the school faculty must have a solid communication system. Some strategies for more effective communication include: strengthening the links in communication between faculty and administrators; maintaining functional, effective relationships between teams and administrators; establishing peer review panels for conflict resolution; implementing a school-wide assessment and forming cross-functional teams comprised of faculty to serve as a support group, a sounding board, and a source to explore strategies in conflict resolution. (CR)

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COMMUNICATION - THE CRITICAL LINK

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Many companies and organizations are evaluating their organizational structure to streamline and refine the factors that contribute to a successful and profitable company. New trends are emerging as companies redefine how they will compete in a world where technology, information, and demands of the world market are rapidly changing. Our world is an ecosystem in which changes affect all systems. Changes within the business world affect many facets of life. Changes in other facets of life also affect business. As businesses evaluate their performance evaluation systems, schools must also look at the practices that contribute to effective performance management. When schools establish and implement performance management policies, educators can more effectively educate children.

In performance management, an organization changes its leadership style away from a "command and control" model to a facilitative leadership model. Facilitative leadership recognizes the importance of an employee and relates the employee's work performance to the strategic goals of the organization. High performance workplaces empower workers, enhance communication and trust, focus on the quality of products and/or services, and invest in continuous learning through training and development. Education embraces many of the characteristics of a high performance workplace. However, one critical element is often deficient - enhanced communication. Communication must occur at many different levels within an educational system. Interaction between school administration and the faculty is the first critical level for communication. Too often, though, effective communication does not occur. If the quality of education is to adapt to the rapidly changing needs of our society and increased standards of accountability, administrators and the school faculty must have a solid communication system.

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Many systems contribute to effective communication. Diagraming the process delineates how the systems affect each

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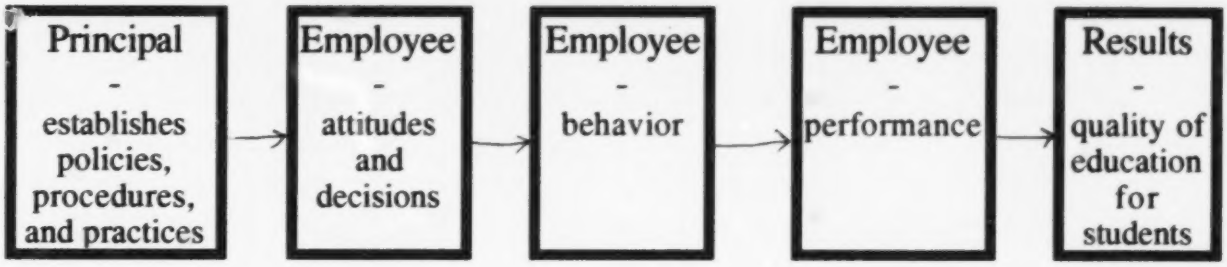
other. For example, a value chain illustrates the process in which each step adds value to the preceding steps as a product is being developed or service is being given. An organization is only as effective as the processes that make up that particular value chain. The following diagram illustrates the value chain for direct line of communication in a school:



A breakdown at some point in the value chain will affect the quality of results. Over time, strong and talented employees cannot compensate for a weak process or link. If a weak link in communication exists between an administrator and the faculty, a less effective educational system evolves. The system deteriorates until the school administrators and faculty incorporate effective communication systems to resolve conflict and to effect changes for better teaching practices.

Effective communication is essential for change within any organization. Open and regular communication builds trust and develops employee buy-in for a changing system. Feedback is also critical for the administration and faculty. Without appropriate feedback, a springboard for positive and effective change, good performance decreases and poor performance remains unimproved.

Schools are often set-up as grade level teams. The teams meet regularly to coordinate curriculum, discuss current issues and provide support. Under this model, teams are effective within a

given grade level. As in businesses, though, independent and successful grade levels do not necessarily lead to an equally successful educational system. Teams must interact with each other. The greatest opportunity for performance improvement exists in improving how teams interact and work together. Principals then become a critical component in managing how teams collaborate with each other. An effective school begins with functional, effective relationships between teams and the administrators.

A teacher's ultimate goal is to improve student's learning. Teachers make important decisions about their teaching abilities, their school, knowing and understanding child development, understanding the children they teach, sharing mutual responsibility for the students, and sharing professional knowledge. Teachers' responsibilities go beyond the school walls to insure success of all children and adults working at the school. Communication is essential for the ongoing success of education.

Educational systems can implement strategies to provide a framework for communication. First, the concept that conflict triggers positive change serves as a foundation for resolving conflicts. When conflict is reframed, responses to conflict move from retaliatory responses to a problem-solving process. Conflict is an essential and constant part of our life. Treating conflict proactively requires accepting mutual responsibility for the problem and objectively defining the dispute based on facts, not emotion. Many conflicts within schools need a more structured format for resolving conflict than an open door policy, but not as formal as a grievance procedure. Establishing a system such as a peer review panel provides a speedy method to address issues concerning application of school and employee policies. Peer review panels offer a confidential, fair, impartial, unbiased, and non-confrontational way for employees to explain their side of a situation. Facts guide decisions, not emotions. Peer review panels determine if the administration's action was fair and consistent according to written policies.

Second, a school could implement a school-wide assessment to determine what the administration and faculty perceived as problem issues. Perceptions often differ within a school on underlying and/or overt issues. All individuals should express those issues they perceive exist within the workplace. Unresolved issues and misperceptions can seriously undermine the staff and their ability to teach effectively. Perceptions often define reality rather than reality itself.

A third strategy would be to create cross-functional teams comprised of the faculty. Each team would be a composite of all faculty members. The teams would serve as a support group, a sounding board, and a source to explore strategies to resolve problems as expressed in the school-wide assessment. They would compile data to clarify changing needs and generate possible solutions for existing conflicts. Teams would reconvene to consider suggested solutions. School-wide strategies would then be adopted, implemented, and revised when necessary.

Teachers, empowered to make important decisions about teaching and their school are a distinguishing characteristic of effective schools. The frequency and extent to which the teachers discuss effective practices, collaborate and design materials, inform and review one another characterizes effective schools. Educating children is a collaborative process. The process is constantly evolving. Collaborating educational resources is essential for school accountability. A unified faculty, no matter how diverse, will accomplish the mission of education. Accomplishing this mission requires communication and teamwork of the faculty and administration. That is only one tiny step toward improving each child's education. Education is a collaborative process that also includes parents and community organizations. Ongoing dialogue needs to occur with all the stakeholders as we continue to grow and stretch to meet society's changing educational needs. Communication is the critical link.